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ABSTRACT

While applied sociology has gained much popularity over the past decade, attempts to document empirically the use of sociology have produced disappointing results. Possible reasons for these results include lack of knowledge about how information is used in the decision making process, methodological bias stemming from the fact that those who research this topic have a clear stake in the outcome, and confusion over the notion of "using sociology." "Using sociology" can mean vocational use at the Bachelor of Arts level, the use of sociology in the context of the empirical method, and the use of sociological concepts such as social structure. A possible way of increasing the use of applied sociology is to teach students to document, analyze, and evaluate the application process. This can be done in a variety of settings from internships to courses. Such action should have direct impact upon the teaching of applied sociology and the use of sociology in non-academic settings. (IS)

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# Applied Sociology as Knowledge Utilization: A Meeting Ground for Theory and Practice

Joseph R. DeMartini

Washington State University

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ABSTRACT

While applied sociology has gained much popularity over the past decade, attempts to empirically document the use of sociology have produced disappointing results. I offer three explanations for this state of affairs and propose a course of action which sociologists can take to better understand the phenomenon of application. Such action should have direct impact upon the teaching of applied sociology, and the use of sociology in non-academic settings.

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It is safe to say that applied sociology has come of age. Application is now a public concern of the American Sociological Association, professional journals, undergraduate and graduate curricula, and organizations specifically devoted to the use of sociological knowledge in non-academic settings. The topic of this session alone attests to the fact that applied sociology has acquired a considerable degree of legitimacy--its critics notwithstanding.

Lest we bask in the glow of success, there is a troubling matter that cannot be easily swept under the rug. People don't use sociology very much. A considerable literature has accumulated over the past 15 years which documents the extent to which policy decision makers use and don't use sociological research findings. The bottom line on this research is rather negative (Scott & Shore, 1979; Goldstein et.al., 1978; Weiss, 1977).

Yet, we continue to champion the cause of applied sociology, urge our colleagues to accept (and reward) these applied efforts, and seriously examine how we can better teach our students the importance and process of application. Is not our behavior a contemporary example of what Festinger (1964) said we should expect when prophecy fails? Why do we advocate the application of our discipline when so many people find so little use for it? Is it really true that sociology will be applied if only we teach our students of its value?

These are threatening questions, but they need to be asked. Precisely because we have spent so much energy exploring the world of applied sociology, it is time that we stop and take stock in: a) what we have accomplished; b) what our critics have to say; and c) where we should proceed before advancing the bandwagon of applied sociology any further. I do not propose to do all of the above in this paper. But towards that end I


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will: 1) propose an explanation for why research findings on the use of social science information are so disappointing; and 2) map out a course based upon this explanation which we need to follow both as researchers and teachers.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

There are surely a multitude of reasons why research on the use of social science information has not produced more positive results. The picture is certainly not all that bad, but neither is it very encouraging. Let me suggest three reasons why this may be the case.

First, we know very little about the process by which information is used in the decision making process. Descriptions of this process range from the "rational" model to the "garbage can" model with an infinite variety inbetween (Daft, 1983). There is no consensus over which model best fits what situation. Furthermore, as good social scientists we are well aware that decisions depend on more than facts. They are highly influenced by political, personal, and situational variables. If the determinants of any one decision are multiple and their weights unknown--as is their interaction--is it not surprising that a single element such as social science information explains so little of the variance? This situation is not unlike the state of research on the effects of education. We all agree that formal education does something to students, but we have difficulty documenting what elements in the educational process have what effects. In light of the above complexities, it may be premature to conclude that social science doesn't have much impact upon decision making. At the present time, we just don't know.

A second reason for these disappointing findings is also a partial explanation for the first. Almost all the available research on knowledge



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use exhibits a methodological bias stemming from the fact that those who research this topic have a clear stake in the outcome. When we ask whether or not policy makers use social science research we are asking whether or not policy makers listen to what we have to say. We treat our research as an entity and attempt to measure its degree of impact. We rush to ask decision makers if they use the results of our work not unlike the way we ask our children 'what did you learn in school today?'. The similarity in responses to both questions should not surprise us.

Dervin (1983) has suggested that we employ a "user construct" when looking at knowledge use. That is, we should try and get into the situation of the user and see the world from her (or his) perspective. How does a decision maker navigate the myriad of forces and mountains of information? How does the decision maker strike a balance between the content of information and the press of forces such as political expediency and budgetary constraint? Only after we begin to understand the world from the perspective of the decision maker should we then ask when and under what circumstances is social science knowledge put to use. Indeed, seen in this light, knowledge use may be much closer to knowledge creation in terms of the processes involved.

Finally, the third reason our research on knowledge use has been so disappointing lies neither with the difficulty of the research topic nor our research methodology. Rather, it has to do with our confusion over the notion of "using sociology". Weiss (1979) has already enumerated the many meanings of the word "use"; and we need no one to remind us of the many definitions of "sociology". Fifteen years ago Smelser (1969) wrote that sociology was "soft in the center and fuzzy around the edges". Things have certainly not gotten any better since then. Therefore, my charge that we

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are unclear what we mean when we ask others to "use sociology" is less a criticism than a fact of life.

However, it is not a fact about which we can do nothing. There are at least three meanings to the phrase "use sociology" and research on knowledge use speaks to each quite differently. The first is implied in our references to what sociology majors do upon graduation as a result of their major. (Going to graduate school doesn't count.) This is not very precise, but it reflects a general belief that many of us have, i.e. taking sociology courses and learning the sociological perspective makes a difference in people's lives. We believe that our discipline's alumni (at the BA level) see the world differently, propose different (better?) solutions to social problems, and are more successful in analyzing social issues and selecting among courses of action than non-sociologists. The research on knowledge use is not designed to tell us if we are right or wrong. As a result, those who subscribe to this first meaning make a claim that rests more on faith than fact.

We reveal a second and more precise meaning when we work with graduate students and talk about how sociology can be used in the context of the empirical method. For some, using sociology means holding oneself accountable to the rules of this method in order to maximize the validity and reliability of information on which we take action. Minimizing bias, withholding judgment, and gathering data on social rather than just psychological or economic variables results in one version of the sociological perspective and therefore another view of how we can use sociology. The literature on knowledge utilization is mixed when it comes to this type of use. Some researchers argue that the characteristics of sophisticated social science research have little to do with whether or not


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the results of that research are used (van de Vall & Bolas, 1980). Others disagree (Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980). Much more evidence is needed before drawing conclusions about how frequently sociology is used by this second definition.

A third meaning we attach to the phrase, using sociology, has to do with the relevance and utility of sociological concepts. To think in terms of social structure, social role, reference groups, socialization, social organization, and social exchange is to think sociologically. To apply these ideas to our work is to apply our disciplinary training. Cherns (1979) makes this definition central to his understanding of applied social science when he writes that "...the application of natural sciences generally takes place through the medium of technology (while) the utilization of the social sciences takes place through the medium of concepts" (p. 8). Are sociological concepts useful outside the academy? Apparently so, but to a limited extent. Researchers have found these concepts to be important for setting the stage and providing a world view for policy makers; but their direct influence pales against the force of political, personal and economic factors (Patton et. al., 1977).

What does the empirical evidence tell us about the use, i.e. application, of sociology outside the college and university classroom? Depending upon your definition, evidence on how frequently sociology is used ranges from "never" to "now and then" with an awful lot of "no information." No matter how optimistically one might interpret the available data, they certainly are not as strong as the current level of commitment to applied sociology held by some of our colleagues.

We can respond to this state of affairs in several ways. The first is to place our commitment to (faith in) applied efforts on hold until more


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data are available. We have been well trained to make such a response, though it may require an alteration in personal values which will not come without some difficulty. A second is to redouble our efforts in teaching and practicing applied sociology such that the benefits of this work will become known to a wider audience. True believers can withstand moments of doubt; but at what point do we seriously entertain a critical look at what we do and whether we should continue doing it? A third response is to focus our efforts on a careful examination of the application process and to temper our commitment to applied sociology by the results of this examination. I will devote the remainder of my paper to this third response which I propose as a course of action for those seriously interested in teaching applied sociology.

DOCUMENTING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

It is time for us to examine the nature of applied work and the roles played by sociology and sociologists. Towards this end I make the following proposal: teach students to document, analyze, and evaluate the application process as a precondition to their endorsement of applied sociology. If we take this proposal seriously we will require a great deal of our students. Most importantly, we will ask them to base their own commitments on the results of a conscious effort to understand the utility and value of the concepts and techniques central to our discipline. We will also be generating a set of critics who may question our ideas and assumptions; and that is very healthy. What we will not be doing is assuming that what we teach and what students learn is automatically of value outside the context of formal education. Instead, we will look for ways to identify whether or not it is of value and under what circumstances.

My proposal is actually part of a larger agenda which I have called the

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sociology of applied sociology, and it requires more than its share of sophistication in theory and research design. But students can be started on the road to developing both. For example, when they do internships, students place themselves in ideal situations to examine the use of social science information. Part of an internship's requirements could be the writing of several papers which describe what persons do in a particular work setting, the kinds of problems they must solve, the kinds of information they use to reach solutions, and the place (if any) of social science knowledge within this pool of information. An intern can interview supervisors and colleagues and explore how they evaluate the utility of their educational background and training.

These same interviews could be conducted by students who are not enrolled in a field placement, but taking a course in the sociology of education, the sociology of work, or social problems. Students taking courses in the family can talk with family members--preferably not their own--to find out where parents get their ideas about child rearing and problem solving. Students can keep journals in which they dissect their own attitudes and behaviors as these reflect the influence of social science thought.

These assignments should not be taken lightly nor can they be completed without careful attention to research methodology. But when done even at the most elementary level they will alert students to the difficulty of and need for a systematic examination of what they learn and its relevance beyond the campus. Not all information, of course, is equally useful. Lest you read into my remarks a crass pragmatism, I hasten to add that utility is only one dimension of knowledge and not necessarily the most important. But persons championing the value of applied sociology must provide some notion

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of utility that is measurable and train their students in the measurement process

What will students find when they systematically examine the use of social science in their and others' lives? I don't know; but I suspect their data is less important than the fact that students will be attending to them. Instead of accepting their instructors' assertions that the contents of a particular text are valuable or their own cynicism that no course requirement is of any worth once the semester is over, students will be testing assertions of value against evidence of use and impact.

Should we all act on my proposal tomorrow, I would hope for two positive side effects. The first is a laying to rest of the debate over 'what is applied sociology?'. Students can be told that whatever their definition, they simply must state it in terms which allow for empirical investigation. After all, we do not require consensus on the meaning of sociology before any one of us proceeds on a course of research. Just the reverse takes place. The collective content of our research and writing is taken as a working definition of our discipline. Let the same process define applied sociology as well.

Second, our graduates will be much better equipped to apply what they have learned if they develop the interest and ability to examine what is most effective in the workplace. Urging students to be critical of what contributes to successful task completion on the job should also lead them to be critical of what they learn in the classroom. The result is better communication between theorist and practitioner and a more realistic view of the applicability of social science.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the ideas presented here might be seen as conservative since



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they call for further research b[illegible] drawing conclusions about the value of applied sociology. In another v[illegible]hey are heretical for they question the value of applied efforts among co[illegible]eagues who have very much invested in applied concerns. I prefer to see them as optimistic. Information that results from a study of the application process will surely enhance our knowledge about effectiveness in the use of sociological skills. We should welcome, not fear, this information and encourage our students to do the same.

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